

N.H., Maine reject Iraq withdrawal plans, Vermont backs them

By The Associated Press | June 22, 2006

Senators from northern New England were split Thursday on proposals aimed at getting American troops out of Iraq.

The all-Republican New Hampshire and Maine delegations joined their GOP colleagues in rejecting both a proposal to require the withdrawal of all combat troops from Iraq by next year and a nonbinding resolution urging the administration to begin removing troops. Vermont's two senators, a Democrat and an independent, voted for both measures.

Maine Sen. Olympia Snowe co-sponsored an amendment that affirms the Senate's support of U.S. troops fighting in Iraq and provide a path for bringing troops home.

"It lays out an explicit plan based on the conditions on the ground -- not on timetables that empower the terrorists and leave our troops vulnerable to further attack. It also requires specific quarterly reports from the President to Congress and the American people with regard to the security situation in Iraq," Snowe said in a statement. "This is critical because the message must be clear -- our presence in Iraq is in no way indefinite, open-ended and unconditional."

New Hampshire Sens. Judd Gregg and John Sununu offered different reasons for their votes.

Sununu called the withdrawal deadlines arbitrary and accused Democrats of political posturing. Now that the Iraqis have selected a new government, Congress should focus on helping them meet economic and security goals, he said.

"This sends the wrong message at the wrong time to the millions of Iraqis who have welcomed the removal of Saddam Hussein, supported a new constitution, and voted in their country's first free elections in history," he said.

But Gregg said how troops leave Iraq is more about America's security than Iraq's.

Setting an arbitrary deadline for withdrawal would undermine America's chances of success in fighting terrorism and would "say to the Islamic world that democracy, individual rights and economic pluralism will not work there, thus emboldening those terrorists we need to defeat."

"It is simply better to fight them there than here and we should not undermine our men and women who are there and fighting for us with such an arbitrary deadline," he said.

Vermont independent Sen. James Jeffords argued that Congress should not be asking troops to stay in harm's way one day longer than necessary.

"This Administration has lacked an exit strategy from the first day we went to war, and as a result, we have paid a tragic price. We have 'stayed the course' for far too long," he said. "It takes political courage to change course, and it is time Congress showed such courage. Our troops deserve nothing less."

Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy countered Republican talk of "cutting and running" by noting the ease with which politicians "ask others to fight and die from the safety and comfort of an office in Washington."

"How easy it is to vote for tax cuts and to self-righteously wave the flag, while our troops are scavenging for scraps of metal to protect themselves," he said. "They were sent to fight and die without armor, by top Pentagon officials back home who proudly, dismissively and resolutely insisted they were ready, when they were not."